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As Talks Near, U.S. Strains To Divine Moscow's Omens

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 22 — The Reagan Administration is looking at the Soviet Union these days through a particularly narrow focus: It is trying to find out if the Kremlin's leaders are ready for decisive actions to help break the impasse in Soviet-American negotiations and produce arms control agreements with Washington.

This has put new pressure on analysts in the Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department — and the outside consultants from universities and research institutes — to come up with answers for policy-makers trying to discern the intentions, health and abilities of Konstantin U. Chernenko and the rest of the Soviet political elite.

At the moment Government analysts — and outside academics — agree that Mr. Chernenko is indisputably in charge. But there the agreement breaks down.

Some officials, looking at the apparent shaky health of Mr. Chernenko, his brief tenure at the top, and his unfamiliarity with foreign affairs, believe that Moscow is not now able to engage in a constructive give-and-take that could produce mutually satisfactory accords. Therefore they argue that any American initiatives are destined to be disappointing.

Others, pointing to the continuity in the top leadership, particularly the presence of Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko in the Politburo, argue that the Russians are ready for agree-

ments. But, they say, given the caution and consensus thinking in the Kremlin, the United States will have to be willing to make some concessions to end the deadlock.

An Encouraging Sign

The announcement today that Mr. Gromyko and Secretary of State George P. Shultz will hold preliminary discussions in Geneva in early January on ways of tackling all the outstanding arms control issues was viewed by State Department officials as an encouraging sign of movement in Moscow. They said the Russians appeared

to be willing to discuss the suspended nuclear arms control talks without their previously stated conditions being met.

But at the same time, it remained to be seen what proposals both sides would actually bring to Geneva and whether progress could be made beyond the preliminary round.

There is agreement here — as there is among Kremlin-watchers in Moscow and in Eastern Europe — that time may run out on Mr. Chernenko before he can assert himself. The experts also agree that he has to rely more than his predecessors did on the consent and advice of the other members of the Politburo and the Secretariat, at the top of the Communist Party hierarchy.

Significance for U.S. Policy

There is disagreement, however, on what this means for American policy. Should the United States move forcefully and energetically now, and take advantage of whatever time Mr. Chernenko has in office? Or does it matter? Will there be another leadership change? And should the United States therefore await the result of the jockeying for power, in which the front-runners seem to be Mikhail S. Gorbachev and Grigory V. Romanov?

A huge bureaucracy here deals with and tries to answer such questions. But Kremlin-watching is akin to meteorology. Despite all the resources and manpower, in the end the experts, like weathermen, are often wrong in their predictions.

While American intelligence agencies can sometimes tell what kind of Soviet military equipment is taken off ships in Nicaraguan ports, they cannot supply some of the fundamental information needed to gauge the intentions and personalities of Soviet leaders.

This lack of data is annoying to some policy-makers, who dislike the hedging that goes into intelligence analyses.

"You should know that until Andropov's wife showed up for his funeral last March, we didn't know she was alive," a senior official in the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency said recently. "Can you imagine? We've been tracking this guy as head of the K.G.B. and then as the top man in the Kremlin and we don't even know if his wife is dead or alive."

He was referring to Yuri V. Andropov, the former head of the Soviet intelligence and internal-security agency, who replaced Leonid I. Brezhnev as

Soviet leader in November 1982, and who died last February. He was replaced, in turn, by Mr. Chernenko.

A State Department expert acknowledged that there was uncertainty whether Mrs. Andropov had died or not. "But that's an improvement," he quipped. "When Podgorny became President, we didn't know if he had ever been married." Nikolai V. Podgorny was the Soviet head of state from 1965 to 1977, when Mr. Brezhnev was the party leader and Aleksei N. Kosygin the Prime Minister.

Assiduous Trivia-Collecting

Much of Kremlin-watching relies on patient, assiduous filing away of trivia and the ability to remember it years later. The Soviet press produces very little biographic information about its people. Much of the C.I.A.'s vast library of books and charts of Soviet personnel is put together by culling Soviet periodicals, noting dates when a person takes a new post, and filing away that information.

The C.I.A., for instance, regularly publishes a paperback book that does nothing but list every public appearance by senior Soviet leaders. This is a way of helping to tell if a person has disappeared from the public eye for political or physical reasons.

Such work may be tiresome, but nevertheless produces results. It has allowed analysts to chart, for instance, how Mr. Chernenko rose from the ranks on Mr. Brezhnev's coattails.

This is important, officials say, because it indicates that Mr. Chernenko is probably disposed to follow the policy of détente in foreign affairs that Mr. Brezhnev espoused. The analysts also say that Mr. Chernenko, at the age of 73, is hardly likely to take the kind of actions that might lead to an East-West confrontation.

The intelligence collectors here have very little to say about some Soviet leaders.

"We know very little about Vorotnikov," one analyst said, "who's around him, what they do, very little." Vitaly I. Vorotnikov is the Premier of the Russian republic, the largest of the Soviet republics, and one of the 12 full members of the Politburo.

Among the Least Capable

Mr. Chernenko is not regarded here as a strong or imaginative leader. In fact, he is considered by many experts as the least capable of all the leaders since Stalin's death. But, as one State Department official said, only Nikita S. Khrushchev, who took over as Communist Party leader after Stalin died and was ousted in 1964, seemed to take per-

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sonal initiatives.

Mr. Brezhnev and Mr. Andropov both seemed to work through the collective leadership, the analysts say. And even Mr. Khrushchev, they note, initially had to share power with Prime Minister Georgi M. Malenkov and then with Prime Minister Nikolai A. Bulganin, and finally took power as leader of both the Government and the party after about four years.

Some experts here expected last summer that Mr. Chernenko, who was clearly in poor health, was about to be replaced. But now that opinion has been revised and the experts are working on the assumption that Mr. Chernenko has withstood the political and physical challenges to remain in charge — but for how long is a matter of conjecture.

Mr. Chernenko's presumed reliance on his advisers, and the role of those advisers in any negotiations, is also a matter of conjecture. One of those key men, Dmitri F. Ustinov, 76, the long-time Defense Minister, has not been seen in public since late September, and is rumored to have had a stroke.

He is regarded here as possibly too ill to remain in the important post, and the man reputed to be in line for his post is Marshal Sergei L. Sokolov, a First Deputy Defense Minister, who has reportedly been in charge of the military establishment since Marshal Ustinov's presumed illness.

Enormous Gromyko Influence

If Marshal Ustinov is replaced, that would leave Mr. Gromyko, the 75-year-old Foreign Minister, as the sole foreign policy and national security expert in the Politburo, giving him enormous influence on policies.

But even though no Soviet leader is better known to Americans than Mr. Gromyko, who was Ambassador here during World War II, and has been Foreign Minister since 1957, there is still disagreement here about whether Mr. Gromyko is ready to recommend the kind of flexibility that could help overcome the deep divisions between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Against the background of continuity lent by the older men in the Soviet leadership, Kremlin-watchers are observing the presumed competition among the younger candidates for the top Soviet leadership. Of those believed to be the top two candidates, Mr. Gorbachev, who is to visit Britain next month, has reportedly been designated by the Soviet authorities as the heir to Mr. Chernenko.

He has been called the "second General Secretary" by party aides. At last month's meeting of the Central Committee, Mr. Gorbachev, 53, chaired the session when Mr. Chernenko spoke to the policy-making body on agricultural problems. And on the annual Nov. 7 holiday in Moscow, Mr. Gorbachev's

picture was placed next to Mr. Chernenko's at the Central Telegraph Office on Gorky Street, signaling that he was at least second among the equals.

Irritating Eagerness?

Mr. Gorbachev, who was close to Mr. Andropov, may have irritated Mr. Chernenko by appearing to be too eager to replace him, some analysts believe. Western diplomats have reported that ever since Mr. Chernenko took power last February, they have heard derogatory stories and jokes about him, spread by Soviet officials who are regarded as likely K.G.B. agents.

This verbal undercutting of the top Soviet official, done by those who were once close to Mr. Andropov and now presumably support Mr. Gorbachev, has fascinated Kremlin-watchers here. But they hesitate to conclude that a showdown may be nearing between Mr. Chernenko and Mr. Gorbachev.

This old-fashioned scratching around for information, and reading between the lines of Communist Party press reports of economic disputes and other internal matters, contrasts with the wide use of technology to forecast Soviet economic growth and identify Soviet military production and deployments. The United States can tell with more certainty where a particular missile is placed than it can about what is going on in the higher echelons of the Soviet leadership.

Gossip About Romanov

Little bits of gossip are fed into the mill. For instance, one reason that Mr. Romanov, 61, once the party leader in Leningrad and a man with a reputation for being tough, is not regarded as a serious challenger to Mr. Gorbachev is because he is known to drink to excess. In Helsinki recently he was reportedly unable to deliver a planned speech because of his drinking, diplomatic sources said.

One American official who has stated publicly that Mr. Chernenko does not have the authority of other recent Soviet leaders is Arthur A. Hartman, the Ambassador to the Soviet Union. He told the Overseas Writers Club in October: "Even the Soviets would admit he's not a leader who has the full strength and backing of the entire apparatus in the Soviet Union. It takes a while for that to be achieved by any leader."

The analysts may disagree about some assessments of power in the Kremlin, but no analyst disagrees with Mr. Hartman's basic point — that the Soviet leaders will move cautiously. This could mean little likelihood of any arms control agreements, but it could also mean little likelihood of any sudden crises in the world, given the inherent caution of both Americans and Russians at the top.

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Chernenko's Tenure as Soviet Leader

During Konstantin U. Chernenko's nine months as Soviet leader, Western intelligence analysts have based some of their conclusions about his relative strengths and weaknesses among the men who hold power in the Kremlin on these public events and actions.



Konstantin U. Chernenko

Feb. 13, 1984

Chernenko chosen General Secretary of Communist Party, succeeding Yuri V. Andropov, who died Feb. 9.

April 12

Chosen Soviet President; nominated by Mikhail S. Gorbachev, presumed to be No. 2 in the Kremlin.



Politburo members applaud after Soviet Parliament elects Mr. Chernenko President.

March 2

In first major address, calls for U.S. actions to improve American-Soviet relations.

May 8

Soviet Union announces it will not participate in Olympic Games in Los Angeles.

June 11

Mr. Chernenko calls for talks on banning space weapons.

Aug. 30

Mr. Gorbachev opens Friendship-80 sports games, leading to further rumors of Chernenko illness.

July 15

Leaves for vacation, not to reappear in public until Sept. 5. Long absence leads to speculation that he is ill.

Sept. 4

Erich Honecker, East German leader, puts off scheduled visit to West Germany, presumably under Soviet pressure. Todor Zhivkov, Bulgaria's leader, follows suit.

Sept. 28

Andrei A. Gromyko, Soviet Foreign Minister, meets with President Reagan.



Gromyko and President Reagan



Erich Honecker

Nov. 16

Mr. Chernenko urges the United States to join in a return to a new era of détente. A day later, Moscow proposes meeting between Mr. Gromyko and Secretary of State George P. Shultz.